

Artist Statement: Lydia Larson

“Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.”

-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (p. 28)

To argue that art is a vehicle, is to assume that it serves one or multiple functions. These functions are continually in flux depending on the climate of society and culture. However, only the individual artist assumes his or her own purpose in returning to the studio day after day. If art is understood as its own reality, than it does not solely reflect life. It allows for another kind of life: a possibility. My hope and goal for my art making practice is to construct a visual stage for possibilities, specifically that which seems impossible. As Aristotle once said, “Art completes what nature cannot bring to finish.” Possibility relates to hope, and hope is a parallel reality.

I am interested in the notion that signs may function as parts to a whole. A symbol is a sign that has acquired meaning in a significant or arbitrary way. In my work, symbols become parts that plug into an assigned place within the context of a larger invented narrative (the whole). In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, he speaks about signs in reference to the imaginary city, Tamara. He writes:

You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger’s passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are. (Calvino, 13).

My work is made up of a plethora of signs. Some signs are merely what they are. Some are substitutes for other things that recognize in part a narrative that is in its essence: invisible. These signs are also interchangeable and mutable depending on the personal experiences the

viewer brings to the piece. Calvino writes, “Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places” (Calvino, 28). I imagine the viewer as a traveler. Therefore, the narrative of each painting can be thought of as a new city, in which the viewer may find their own possibility. Surely there are many other narratives that extend beyond the artist’s original intention or personal narrative employed.

In this way, my current body of work possesses many interchangeable allegorical elements. I am drawn to the notion of the *Istoria* that is expounded upon in Alberti’s *Della Pittura*. Usually this genre of painting utilizes figures, animals, landscape, and architectural structures to tell a story. I strongly gravitate toward these types of paintings. The work of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brughel are some of my favorite examples of paintings in this vein. Alberti notes, “the *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul: we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving. These movements of the soul are made known by movements of the body” (Alberti, 77). Therefore, I think of art as one of the highest forms of empathy and a means in which the human experience can be shared. Alberti talks specifically about emotional movement being transferred in connection with the movement of the body. I am interested in movement conveying messages, but not solely in connection to human form. Movement and emotive qualities can manifest through any vehicle: tornados, clouds, horses’ hooves, gestural patterns in the landscape, reindeer tangled in orange extension cords, etc. In *Envoy*, eleven reindeer race wildly through the snow caught, but not hindered, by a mass of extension cords and lights. Energy and emotion is conveyed just as strongly through a non-human form. It is not merely limited to the figure. *Istoria* later became what is known as history painting in which I find a deep connection mostly because I love narrative. I am interested in

communication across distance and how, so often, it seems to fail. I am interested in exploring the differences and similarities of wandering versus intentional journeys, specifically, the intersection of the two. By exploring the notion of place within displacement, the tension in relationship to communication is highlighted. I also am committed to an examination of the following: rootlessness, the nomadic lifestyle, my personal Nordic heritage, voyages, spiritual forces, time, memory, fragmentation and the great struggle and triumph of communicating. I wish to create little worlds each with a unique internal logic. These paintings are meant to be read singularly, or, in multiple works that are part of a series. Each painting, links to the next to form a larger trajectory. Essentially, this body of work can be broken down into three main overarching layers, all intended to be read intertextually. Each layer encompasses several sub-themes.

The first layer reflects an invented story, complete with: a cast of characters, various settings, and a plot. The second layer is autobiographical in nature drawing upon dreams, visions, and past experiences. The third relies upon history itself, rich with material and narrative I reference and appropriate when applicable.

The first layer of information contains the narrative, which is centered upon the supposed plot describing the delivery of a message. The message is urgent and time sensitive. A sense of anxiety and tension lurks inside these works because of all that could go wrong in the delivery process. There will be blockages in communication because of distance, literally or emotionally/figurative distance. The message will often fall short of its destination. Some of the time, it will be discarded, drowned, lost, pushed away, eaten by a goat, caught up in the wind, hit by a bus, or most tragically: completely ignored. There will be conflicting messages that will attempt to derail and distract from the delivery of the central message. The message may be delivered verbally or via letter. However, usually it is represented as a glowing orb or contained

light source. The message is in fact: Light. This can be widely interpreted depending on the personal background and beliefs of the viewer. What this means for me, will not be exactly the same for another. Yet, I am interested in all the connotations it carries across cultures and even strictly on the basis of art making, the literal importance of light, how it functions, and each artist's unique interpretation. In *The Messenger*, the central message is portrayed as a white orb being carried by a figure above his head. The figure rides into a crumbling amphitheater on an albino elephant (a symbol of rarity/luck/something to behold) toward a mass of people in an attempt to deliver the message. All the while, underneath a make shift tent, an opposing message represented as a blue light is mysteriously brewing. The opposing message will appear to the masses after the central message has left and will proceed to discount the validity of the first. Minds will be swayed. Opinions will form and then, the message will move on. There is one chance to understand or accept the message, always with the lingering question remaining, "which one is true?"

Different stages of the message delivery are depicted. In *Script*, a boy is diving after a paper airplane. On it, the message is written. The boy has not yet read the message. Nevertheless, he is convinced of its importance and goes forth at great risk to retrieve it. Therefore, some paintings are about retrieval, others about delivery and various stages that manifest between the two. The time of day, setting, weather conditions, and characters will differ. However, the variable that remains consistent within the narrative is the plot. The setting is also fairly consistent. Primarily, the narrative takes place in a type of invented landscape that is either completely out of doors, such as in *Looks Like Rain*, or, in a space that is halfway indoors and outdoors as in, *The Messenger*.

By utilizing the fictional narrative as a vehicle, my intention is to investigate other concrete ideas. The visual situations that are constructed function allegorically. The invented

tales, adventures, and situations reflect my own interpretation (and also questions) regarding: various historical events, autobiographical information, biblical doctrine, specific legends, and select philosophical writings.

Other artists (specifically painters), I deeply admire who work in a similar fashion, are: Leslie Lerner, Peter Doig, Neo Rauch, Julie Heffernan, Peter Blume, Jonas Burgert, Hernan Bas, and Henning Kles. My intention is for these works to function alone as a fictional narrative depicting a closed, invented world. Alternatively, the narrative acts as a stand-in for the underlying expression and investigation of the themes mentioned above. The narrative is a safety net, its epic nature a deliberate distraction. The grandeur casts a shadow, which in turn, fosters a safe space for these themes to hide behind where they may securely develop and exist. It is valid for the viewer to read these works in either way.

The second layer is made up of autobiographical fragments. In this layer, connotations are attached to specific objects. These objects therefore, becoming repeating symbols that are personally important, but also, imperative for the support of the narrative. The main theme within this second layer of information is one of displacement. The concept of home has been perplexing for as long as I have been alive. Home is not a structure or a familiar place. Home is something else, somewhere else, beyond my current and temporary surroundings. This has to do with these facts: the number of times I have moved, is significantly higher than the number of years I have been alive, the number of miles I have been in transit via family station wagon easily reaches 20,000, and the number of times my belongings have been dramatically scattered: countless.

To say that my family has nomadic inclinations is the understatement of a lifetime and to admit that my genealogy traces directly back to the Vikings is comical, ridiculous, and true. I imagine that a certain attitude or bloodline must have seeped into the Larson DNA somehow, a

thirst for movement, wanderlust. Where does aimless wandering for wanderings sake and intentional journeys overlap? *Self Portrait as Sami Sibyl* raises these questions. I believe the two can coexist and intersect. I am interested in that exact apex translated into a visual location and all the metaphorical implications it carries. The Viking paraphernalia that appears in my work is deliberately stereotypical in order to reflect the irony I find within my family lineage and the way much of my life has played out in many bizarre circumstances. The helmets are often stand-ins for myself, or my family members. Furthermore, the helmet acts as a type of shield and protective layer. This is best described in *Plot with Eleven Millies*. The helmet functions as a security blanket. It suggests that putting on a metaphorical helmet will provide some kind of faux courage to shroud myself for every time I pack another box with the guaranteed upheaval sure to follow.

Two other important repeating symbols are string and Christmas lights. The string describes feelings of unraveling that are tied with moving. I imagine wearing a never-ending garment, if one string came undone, what would the trail of thread look like after a lifetime of movement? As a child I identified most with the fairy tale, *Hansel and Gretel*, in which two children journey into the woods alone leaving a trail of breadcrumbs to mark their path. The trail of string is my path. It does not lead to one singular home, but is strewn across the landscape, sometimes in clumps or loose undulations; it suggests that there is no earthly home, only restless wandering and travel (literally or figuratively) with temporary stops along the way. Also, the Christmas lights represent a form of security and paradoxically, restriction. Specifically, the lights signify the faith I was raised in, the elements I have rejected, and the parts I hold onto tightly that secure and ground me. The strings of lights can be beautiful, a symbol of hope, and used to safely bind up. However, when twisted, misinterpreted, or polluted, the light strands can be used to abuse, restrict, suffocate, or persecute. However, on the flip side, there can be

benefits. This notion of freedom found within restriction is fascinating to me on a basic and also philosophical level and is visually represented in *Yoke*. A simple example would be in the life of a fish. If a fish had total freedom, it would die. Yet, restricted to water, it thrives. This idea also lends itself to more existential themes.

The last major repeating element in my work is the cliff, plateau, or precarious landscape. The platform acts as a theatrical stage, elevating or drawing attention to a specific situation or event. In theater, a character's entire life can be drastically altered with a seamless change in set. This is how I have felt about my life. The lights dim (more specifically, the car pulls up or the plane lands) and swiftly, my stage changes. Therefore, I feel as though I have lived dozens of different lives on various constructed platforms, each with unique props and scenery. I attempt to create passages in which impermanence insists upon itself: erosion, precarious situations, and awkward places and movement. When multiple platforms are in one painting, this is highlighting the overall fragmented nature of life. However, fragmented experience extends beyond personal relocation and displacement. It is a shared universal phenomenon found in the way we absorb information in a digital age, engage in multiple relationships or marriages, return to civilian life from war, or experience dreams that transition into waking. It is found in the multiple, simultaneous lives many of us lead in who we are to our children, spouses, friends, neighbors, teachers, mothers, fathers, lovers and how to each, we may be someone different. Fragmentation is a part of life. Each part is as valid as any other, no matter how different one stage appears from the last or what hat we wear or prop we carry in the next.

The third layer of my work is connected to history. It is the grand library to freely reference and appropriate, inspire compositions, or spark visual conversations with other artists' work of the past or present. Currently I am researching and referencing the architectural structures of Hieronymus Bosch, the compositions of Peter Doig and Pierre Bonnard, and the

narratives of Henning Kles, Leslie Lerner, Hernan Bas, and Jonas Burgert. I am interested in the mixing and reinterpretation of events that have been written about, documented, discussed, and as a result, inspired the formation of various belief systems and groupings of people both large and small. By forming new connections and new combinations of events, I attempt to make sense of my present world. For example, what happens when a narrative like that of the biblical Elijah (“As they walked on conversing, a flaming chariot and flaming horses came between them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind” [2 Kings, Chapter 2:11]) is combined with the philosophical underpinnings of an artist from fifty years ago and then sprinkled with imagery from a dream I had last week about walking through a mossy bog with an umbrella and a bagel? A new narrative is born, another parallel world. Yet it does not end there. There may be another reality underneath even all of that. Calvino writes, “...while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts. However, the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant... (Calvino, 14). I return to the studio day after day because I am interested in what is underneath the thick coating. Yet paradoxically, in order to discover what lies beneath, it first must literally be built up, in paint.

The process of painting is as significant as anything it represents. My process begins with the initial image that I “see” in my mind. An overall image will come into my mind, almost like a flash. It happens in an instant and I know immediately whether or not it will become a painting based on if the story behind the image fits into what I am currently thinking about, reading about, or developing. If it does not, it may become a painting later on. The image that I “see” does not go away, but rather is stored in my mind to be revisited when necessary. I will sometimes make

an extremely crude sketch (sometimes even on a post it) and from that, I will begin a painting.

An important part of my process is working out the problems on the actual canvas, rather than in sketches. It is part of the work that goes into the making of a painting and I want that history to happen on the canvas whether there are visible marks or not. I know that it is underneath the finished product.

In a large scale painting, I sit in my studio and meditate on the *feeling* of what I am trying to say and then I attempt to translate that feeling into gesture. Then, I make a light wash and only with linear marks make very quick and deliberate gestures on the canvas. Then, quick marks are made on top of that that later will become an object, figure, animal, or structure. This acts as my blueprint and later, larger washes are put over the whole canvas to cover all the white and I begin to build up the surface. These loose marks become tighter in some places, and looser yet in other places. This play of representation with abstract passages is something that is important because even though I consider my work representational, there are certain invisible concepts, emotions, convictions, and thoughts I feel so strongly that I cannot represent them in any other way than an abstract mark. The balance between representation and abstraction is a constant battle and balance. The paint is laid down in direct connection to how I feel and what I want to say about that area. Therefore, the paint itself is an emotive vehicle, the build-up and layering an important part of documenting the history of all of what I feel and (perhaps a little melodramatically) all of what I am when channeled into a single mark. I think James Elkins felt the same way, “As the decades go by, a painter's life becomes a life lived with oil paint, a story told in the thicknesses of oil. Any history of painting that does not take that obsession seriously is incomplete” (Elkins, 5).

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Lydia Larson
MFA Thesis Exhibition
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